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ABSTRACT

The developmental writing program at Northern Virginia Community College, Manassas Campus, deals with three concerns common to developmental writing teachers at two-year colleges. First, since most developmental writing teachers are unable to empathize with, or understand, their students, the Manassas program begins with exercises which acquaint the teacher with student fears, angers, and apprehensions about writing. The second problem is that little has been done to make the vital distinction between remedial and developmental writing. The emphasis in the Manassas program is not on remedial work, but on the total development of students. Regularly scheduled, structured, small group experiences provide for work on goal setting, decision making, values clarification, and assessment of individual strengths. The final problem, the confusion of the teaching of grammar with the teaching of writing, is handled in the Manassas program by presenting students with a model of sentences, not an entire grammar. A surface-level treatment of transformational grammar is used as a basis for teaching sentence patterns. Appendixes to this paper provide initial exercises used in the program and topics for paragraph writing used to carry over the structured group experiences into the classroom. (GW)

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WAITING FOR INSTRUCTIONS ON DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH, OR THE WAY WE DO IT IN MANASSAS

The purpose of this paper is to approach three problems that are central to the state of developmental English at the Manassas Campus of Northern Virginia Community College: first, the fact that most teachers of developmental writing have never needed a developmental writing course and are seldom prepared in their graduate programs to be developmental writing teachers; second, the fact that little has been done to make the vital distinction between developmental and remedial writing; and, third, the fact that the teaching of grammar is still confused with the teaching of writing. Since these problems are rather broad and, on the basis of the literature available on developmental writing, central to the concerns of developmental writing teachers at two-year colleges around the country, the beginnings we have made at Manassas may apply to other programs as well.

1.

My experience as a failure in freshman English did more to prepare me for teaching developmental writing than six years of graduate school. I can't remember the particulars of my first freshman composition course any more; I only remember doing a little better the second time around. Though the story I tell my students has been embellished over the years, I do tell them about my sordid past. It has helped me to empathize with my developmental students.

In a recent article in College Composition and Communication, Mina Shaughnessy makes an important observation that is also central to my experience in teaching developmental writing students: "the greatest barrier to our work with them is our ignorance of them." Most college and junior college teachers of composition were successful in writing courses in college. In fact, they were so successful that they were confident enough to go on to other English courses. While most teachers, by virtue of having once been freshmen, can relate to the freshman composition student, most do not understand the student who has the tag "remedial," or "developmental," or "basic," having never been a member of that group.

As a result, there may be virtue in having been a failure in freshman composition. In fact, only my commonsense fear of writing teachers who have not failed a composition course keeps me from suggesting that every teacher of developmental writing have the wonderful opportunity to fail. Such an experience would certainly erase the ignorance about the developmental writing student that Professor Shaughnessy points out.

More practically, though, developmental writing teachers can still find out what it's like to be a developmental writing student. My experience has led me to the valuable decision that developmental writing courses really must begin before the student is asked to write something to be turned in to the teacher. In a sense I am suggesting that the students be given an orientation program in exactly what they should expect to experience in the course. But, more importantly, I am suggesting that the teacher be oriented to the students to find out student fears, angers,

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and apprehensions about writing. Only then can the teacher understand what the developmental writing course represents to the students.

After all, developmental writing students are in many ways different from students who enter college prepared for composition. Most of my students have been battered by their high school writing teachers, either by being at the center of the teacher's disdain or by being ignored by the teacher altogether. Students enter my classroom believing the English they speak is incorrect and that they should certainly be embarassed by what little they can write. They are fearful of my judgments, having already learned that a teacher's wrath is subtle and sometimes isn't apparent until after the final grades are given. And who wouldn't be fearful of the person who represents an authority that has the right to decide that the language you have used all of your life is wrong? We sometimes forget that a judgment made about a person's language is a judgment made simultaneously about the person's cultural background.

Those of my students who have had a writing course are angry on the first day of class. They have gone through all of this before and have a history of failure at trying to learn "proper" English. Many have a loser mentality and automatically expect the worst; the teacher is their enemy. They are angry at the counselor because he told them that before they can graduate with a certificate in Automobile Maintenance they must pass freshman composition. They are angry at the freshman composition teacher who, on the basis of a qualifying examination and/or an essay, told them they should be in developmental writing. And, even before they get into developmental writing, they are mad at whoever they will confront there. Of course, the anger runs far deeper than that; it is really directed at the self. Most are angry because they feel incompetent and a bit embarassed by this continuing put-down they have to experience. And their response: "How is writing going to make me a better mechanic?"

The last group I have grown accustomed to greeting on the first day of class is comrised of those who appear to be thoroughly interested in learning how to write better. "It will help me with my job," is their usual reason for being here. These students often carry the class discussions, remember from day to day what the assignments actually are, and, on some occasions, want to do extra work. Yet, these students often have the greatest apprehensions about developmental writing; having taken the biggest risks, these students have the most to lose--not in terms of tuition or grades, but in terms of self-respect.

I am not suggesting that I have found a fool-proof way of dealing with these problems, only that I know these problems do exist. In order to find out who feels what in my classes, I postpone writing and any judgment-making activities for the first week and orient my students to developmental writing. At the same time, however, I am orienting myself to my class. My experience is that no two classes are alike. Knowing the idiosyncracies of each group is far more important to me than knowing the sixteen uses of a comma.

The exercises in Appendix 1 are the ones I actually use in my classes. They serve several important functions in my classes, giving the students the opportunity to express how they feel about writing and giving me the opportunity to close the gap between my students and myself. I have found it useful to duplicate copies of these exercises and ask my students to jot down their ideas on their copies. I do not look at their responses; I ask only that they feel free to discuss them with the class.

The exercises appendicized are right for me and for the way I run my class. They may be wrong for someone else. Still, in putting together a program of this sort, the following goals should be achieved.

1. It is useful to begin the orientation by pointing out that writing is different from speak. I like to ask them if ther is a difference for them between using the telephone and writing a letter. Most of my students can express themselves very well if they have the inclination and opportunity to speak to the class. But something happens when it's time to put those ideas on a blank page. This is a good place to start talking about Standard English and audience.

. It is important to give them a sense of group. At some point it is a good idea to include an exercise that takes them out of the classroom together.

3. An exercise should be given that allows the students to freely express their fear of being judged. This involves an open discussion of their feelings toward English teachers or, for that matter, teachers in general. In some cases it is useful to find out how they feel about students who succeed in writing.

4. At least one exercise should be supplied that reveals Standard English to be a dialect of the language. In this regard, role playing might be a good idea. It is interesting to see what happens when the teacher-student role is switched.

5. An exercise should be devised to show the arbitrariness of "right" and "wrong" in communication.

I find that by the time I am ready to begin giving specific instruction in writing, I have a very good idea of who my students are and what their particular needs are. After having seen me take unusual risks in the classroom, my students are able to trust and respond to me. They have something to say and someone to write to. More importantly, I have become aware of the peculiar fears students in developmental writing have.

I have been interested in noting the variety of names that apply to a developmental course in writing: Remedial Writing, Basic Writing, Composition Fundamentals, Verbal Studies Laboratory, Non-Credit English, and, of course, Developmental English. The two central terms in this group are remedial and developmental. It is crucial to where we are now in understanding what goes on in a developmental writing course, that the term remedial has been used synonymously with developmental.

We are ready now for finer distinctions. In a sense, we are now ready to admit that some of our early attempts at preparing students for college writing courses have placed more stress on preparation for college writing and less stress on preparing students. This is not as subtle a difference as it appears to be. These are two entirely different perspectives on what the classroom experience should be.

Remedial suggests a whole range of metaphors for behaviors in the classroom. In

remedial writing the teacher is, in terms of the metaphor, a doctor who is prescribing specific doses of writing and rewriting to remedy some sort of illness. The apparent aim of remedial writing is to indirectly aid the student/patient by curing his illness, the inability to write in Standard English. Remedial writing assumes there is something wrong with not knowing how to write in Standard English and that the problem manifests itself with what the student has written. By working with this illness the doctor can give a cure that assures the student a clean bill of health upon entering composition I. Each graduate of Remedial English will be as healthy as any student who enters college prepared for Comp I.

A happy story, but not one that satisfies the majority of us. We know that the remedy is first to admit that there is no illness. Many of us are beginning to admit that failure to know Standard English is not the same as Original Sin. Some of us are operating a program in Developmental Writing. And we know that this is more than a matter of semantics, this difference between remedial and developmental; it is a matter of what goes on in the classroom.

The Developmental Writing classroom is less like a hospital than like an arena for social interaction. Students are treated from the start as entire human beings as opposed to mechanisms which have not yet managed the behavior of writing. There is an attempt to develop the student totally with what is already present. It approaches the teaching of writing optimistically, examining what is there instead of replacing a part or mourning over what is missing. The problem developmental writing approaches is less the matter of a program of how to write than a matter of why a student would want to learn to write at all.

To do this, one hour out of every five put into the classroom isreserved for a structured small group experience based on the belief that most students in developmental English are there because their potential as a total human being has not been realized. The group is not a therapy session in any clinical sense; the students are told that the program and each of its parts are optional. The experience is founded on the principle that there is something good and worthwhile about each of us, teacher and student alike. The sessions are geared toward increasing the participant's self-awareness and providing an arena for growth, change, and self-understanding. In the sessions, negative feedback is banned in the belief that each of the students already has had plenty of that. What is stressed is the positive side of things, the strengths, the abilities, the potential for increasing one's capacity to grow as a human being.

Our program is geared to a ten week quarter and five hour each week course. Each Friday is set aside as the "Group Day." During the first hour of group work guidelines are established for how the group should interact. With the second Group Day the work begins. The areas of concern are: goal setting, decision making, values clarification, and strengths. As was the case with the orientation, the exercises should be geared to the particular needs of the group.

In planning a program, the following should be taken into consideration:

'. The group leader should be properly trained.

. The person who leads the class should participate fully in the group. It is ideal if the instructor is also capable of leading the group.

3. Since many developmental students have difficulty organizing their time in such a way as to make time for studying, goal setting should be presented in some form, early in the term.

4 No single member of the group should be permitted to dominate.

5. Each member of the group should be encouraged to become involved with the group. Still, each should be reminded from time to time that participation is optional. There is a difference between a gentle nudge and a body block.

6. There should be some way of carrying over the group experience into the classroom so that the group experience is not something apart from the course itself.

To deal with number 6 above I make use of a modified version of the Macrorie Elbow system of freewriting For the first ten minutes of each hour of class my students write into a journal or notebook purchased for use in my course. At first I ask them to record their ideas as freely and as quickly as they can, without worrying about sentences, punctuation, paragraphing The only rule is that they write for ten minutes and keep their pen or pencil moving over the page.

By the end of the second week I expect them to try to write sentences in their journals By the end of week three I ask them to write about one topic each day The topics are ordinarily responses to situations I ask them to deal with By having them write about these situations I am asking them to indirectly consider the value systems, strengths, and goals we have spoken about in group. Because they have already considered this material, they morefreely write about themselves This is not surprising, considering the volume of literature suggesting that as self concept increases so does achievement and vica versa.

A list of these tppics is provided in Apendix two

3.

The earliest article I could trace, arguing that learning to write and learning grammar are two separate functions dates back to the first decade of the twentieth century. For quite a while I taught grammar in conjunction with developmental writing. What I discovered for myself was that students who could score 90% and higher on grammar tests often could not write a good sentence.

Almost everyone can drive without knowing how to tear down a clutch, or walk without memorizing the names of all the parts of the leg. It seems to me that the same is true with writing. We do not need to know the names of all the parts of the sentence to be able to write a sentence. In fact, there really is no proof that learning the parts of a sentence by name improves a person's writing. What ordinarily happens is that the process of learning the parts of the sentence by name is so hard for some of us that it actually turns us off to writing It is good for a person to learn how the language operates; but let's not confuse that with learning how to write

What I try to present my students is a model of sentences, not an entire grammar. I start from the beginning and use a surface level treatment of transformational grammar as a basis for learning the patterns of simple, complex, and compound sentences. I limit the number of technical terms as far as possible. It is

important to note that if this system is used in conjunction with a traditional grammar, such as that used in Blumenthal's 600, the traditional grammatical patterns will fit into this surface transformational system.

The symbols actually used in this program are as follows:

NP: The noun and all the words that cluster around it. This may also be the noun by itself. The noun is what a sentence is about. Words that cluster around the noun change its meaning and occur either before or after the noun itself.

VP: The verb and all the words that cluster around it. This may also be the verb by itself. The verb is what is said about the noun It may also be a word or group of words which link the noun to another part of the sentence which further clarifies the noun.

COMP: The Completer does one of two things. It either completes what we need to know about the NP or receives the action of the VP. In either case, the completer further clarifies either the noun or verb.

CONJ.: The conjunction joins together equal parts of sentences or two sentences.

DET: A determiner introduces a dependent clause It is the word that determines how the group of words following it will be read It also introduces a special kind of COMP, the dependent clause

The general formula for sentence patterns are as follows:

SIMPLE
S = NP + VP + (COMP), where the completer is optional
S = COMP + NP + VP + (COMP, THE COMPLETER SHIFT TRANSFORMATION

In either of the above simple sentences, the individual parts of the sentences may be made compound

COMPOUND SENTENCE: Building upon simple sentence pattern.

S = NP + VP + COMP, + CONJ + NP + VP + COMP.

It is important to note that a completer may be at the beginning of either independent clause. The distinction between independent and dependent clause has also been taught by this time. I also ask that they know what I mean by the term COORDINATION.

COMPLEX SENTENCE: as distinguished from compound, shows greater relationship.

S = NP + VP + (COMP) + (DET + NP + VP + COMP).

The dependent clause is taught as a special kind of completer. It is possible, as a result, to perform a completer shift transformation which results in the following:

S = (DET + NP + VP + COMP) + NP + VP + (COMP).

We also know that the dependent clause can follow the NP

S = NP + (DET + NP + VP + COMP) + VP + COMP

I
it is often easier to treat this final type of complex sentence as one in which

the subordinate clause is a part of the NP.

Using these patterns as a basis, matters such as the parallel sentence and complex-compound sentence are easily handled Since most of my students do not know grammar, this system is far less complicated for them than any system that involves them in learning an entire grammar, whether traditional or transformational. It is also easy to have the students conceptualize using these formula since, as we know by looking at comparative SAT scores in verbal and mathematic tests, most of our students can do work with mathematic formula, though they have tremendous difficulty with their use of the language.

When it is time to discuss sentence fragments and run on sentences I point out that the majority of fragments result from the belief that the dependent clause, DET + NP + VP + COMP, because it has a noun and verb, is a sentence It is also easy to explain that "I like fish, I am a fisherman" is run on, NP + VP + COMP, + NP + VP + COMP/ The pattern can be revised in one of four ways they are already aware of: 1: , CONJ; DET; 3 ; ; 4 two simple sentences

Finally, after introducing each pattern, I have them return to their journal to find ten or fifteen and rewrite them to be turned in to me This enables my students to see that there is nothing difficult about this, that, in fact, they have been writing this pattern since the beginning of the term As time progresses and I am confident the majority of my students can write a variety of sentence types, I tell them that there are times when it is effective to write fragments I do not rush to this bit of information But, I have found this to be a matter they discover in COMP I anyway I explain to them that the most effective way to use a fragment is by being aware of the sentence patterns surrounding it.

APPENDIX 1

The following exercises are ones I have used with some success in the first week of my developmental writing course.

EXERCISE I: Walk into the cafeteria or college union sometime. Watchother people talk to each other with their bodies. Record in the space below what you see

Talk to a classmate without using your hands or arms or making facial expressions. If you can, speak in a monotone In the space below record, first, your feelings about communicating in this way, and, second, how it feels to have someone speak to you without making gestures.

Notice how freely and easily people express themselves in conversation Why do you think most cannot express themselves so freely when they have to write? Why is writing, for some people, like talking without making any gestures? Write a few responses in the space below

EXERCISE II: How do you think people who know how to write "correctly" respond to disorganized and unclear writing? What do you think they feel about the disorganized writer? Write down your ideas here.

EXERCISE III: Consider the impact other peoples' judgments about your writing have on your writing. Do those judgments make you use the telephone instead of write a letter? Are you angered to think that someone will make judgments about you using your writing as a basis? What are your general impressions of English teachers? Of students who succeed in writing courses? What characteristics do you associate with them? Write down your ideas here.

EXERCISE IV: How would you respond to this situation? You are the teacher. The meanest looking man you have ever seen has just decided to enter your classroom on the first day of class. You watch him duck beneath the door, step inside your classroom, and fill the front row. You ask him to write something for you and you discover he does not write Standard English. He does not punctuate, write sentences or write paragraphs. He approaches you later in the cafeteria to ask you how you liked his essay. You think only of the three pencils he squashed while he wrote. What would you say to him? In the space below, explain how you would discuss his writing problems.

EXERCISE V: There are times when it is inappropriate to use Standard English. Can you think of any such situations?

APPENDIX

The following topics are used for paragraph writing. They are intended to carry over the group experience into the classroom.

1. Describe yourself as you think you really are, with all the insights few pepple ever have.

. Take time to consider heroes and villians as you remember having them in your youth. What qualities did these two possess?

3. What kind of landscape best describes you? Describe the setting of this landscape in detail

4. Respond to the following situation. You are walking down a busy street in a large city. You are surrounded by a crowd of other pedestrians. You do not know any of them. Looking straight ahead, you notice a young woman, about twenty-t two years old. From where you are walking you can see her bump the back of a well dressed, middle aged man and pull his wallet from his back pocket. No one notices this incident except you. What will you do?

5 Respond to the following situation. On the same city street as in #4, someone comes up to you and asks you for some change.

6 You have just slept through a very important examination. How would you go about asking your teacher for a make up?

7 You are taking a bus trip which will last for three days. The bus is crowded; you are seated with a person of the opposite sex, about twenty five years your senior, who is going to the same city. This person is a compulsive talker and insists on poking your arm if you start to doze. You have two more days of this. How will you respond?

8 State a single pet peeve you possess. Now describe in detail a situation in which this peeve came in to play

9 You are on a subway in New York. The car is empty except for you. At the next stop, three men enter and walk over to you. They stand over you, in the otherwise empty car, leaning toward you and holding the stand-up straps. What would you do?